Coventry: the making of a modern city, 1939-73 (Historic England, Swindon, 2016). By Jeremy Gould and Caroline Gould.

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For those interested in the post-war history of Coventry, 2016 is something of a boom year with the publication of not only Jeremy and Caroline Gould's accessible and beautifully presented *Coventry: the making of a modern city, 1939-73,* but also Chris Pickford's revised edition of the 1966 *Buildings of England* volume for Warwickshire. *Coventry* is the latest in the Historic England 'Informed Conservation' series, begun in 2002, which seeks 'to raise awareness and highlight the importance of the built heritage of localities undergoing rapid change'. The book is essentially a history of that city's post-war architecture and planning – both subjects of international attention – and though the end-date is 1973, the Goulds, with their background in architecture and design, bring their narrative up to the present day with an opinionated epilogue. A free digital copy of their book can be downloaded from Historic England's website.

In eight short chapters, each richly illustrated with photographs and old drawings (almost 140 in as many pages), the Goulds place Coventry within international planning, architecture, and political debates, beginning in Chapter 1 with the city before the devastation of November 1940, a townscape of 'narrow, cobbled streets and half-timbered houses' (p. 1) set amid inter-war banks, pastiche Tudor offices, and, perhaps anticipating later controversies, debates over the construction of a ring-road. Chapters 2 through 5 are arranged chronologically and biographically, focusing on the tenure of the city architects Donald Gibson (1939-55), to whom modern Coventry owes much of its plan, Arthur Ling (1955-64), the enigmatic Marxist who wished for a central pedestrian precinct with 'a sense of calm like one experiences in Sienna' (p. 36), and Terence Gregory (1964-73), who took a more assuredly Brutalist line with his muscular Sports and Recreation Centre.

Gibson and Ling, as the authors outline, operated in an era of unprecedented state control over property rights and planning, and they fundamentally reshaped the post-war city beginning with the central Broadgate shopping district. Like an expanding concertina, they took a city planned on two dimensions and transformed it into one planned on three dimensions with multiple tiers of pedestrian arcades, under- and over-passes, and slip roads. Perhaps the most egregious result of this was the predacious ring-road, which formed 'an almost impenetrable barrier around the inner city', requiring pedestrians to use 'tortuous and uncomfortable detours' (p. 59). Cyclists fared even worse. Gibson and Ling, like the counterparts in every major British city, had to contend with a dramatic increase in car ownership (317% in Coventry between 1948 and 1960 (p. 35)). But the challenge of parking spaces for all these cars in the city centre resulted in some novel architectural solutions: the reinforced concrete City Market, of the kind one normally sees in Mumbai or Accra, built by Ling in 1956-58, provided space for 200 cars on its roof. Its bold brick and steel clock-tower (sadly 'now demolished') was 'only visible when driving across the roofs of the city' (pp. 43-44).

The scale of Coventry's redevelopment, brought about by its wholesale destruction, permitted a multi-layered townscape that distinguished it from other midland cities such as Leicester. The Goulds show that this palimpsest of destruction and renewal provides an exciting and constantly varying townscape, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Lower Precinct shopping district, built 1955-60. But it is remarkable how often buildings described in the text are noted as having since been demolished – so much of the post-war city has already been replaced (this reviewer counted no fewer than 46 instances in this short book!). The Goulds tackle this litany of destruction in Chapter 8 with a focus on post-1973 developments: 'the 1970s and 1980s', we learn, 'were not kind to Coventry' (p. 129). The story of deindustrialisation is the same in every major midlands city: high unemployment, abandoned housing estates, a shift to developer-led building, the abolition of the post of city architect (in Coventry's case in 1994), and the 'clumsy and intrusive' reworking of central precincts (p. 134). In an interesting reflection at the end, the authors call for better protection of the few post-war schools now left in the city, they endorse the move away from the 'strict functional zoning which was the backbone of post-war planning' (p. 142), and they question the necessity now

of the unloved central ring-road. Here they suggest a reversal to Gibson's original plan for an 'at-grade boulevard with the level pedestrian crossings and cycle lanes' (p. 143).

This book will be a rewarding read for those interested in landscape history. Beyond issues of town planning, and the experience of living, working (and shopping) in a multi-layered city, the Goulds are careful to situate Coventry's post-war architecture in the city's townscape. Their detailed descriptions may perhaps at times overwhelm a reader not intimately familiar with the city, but a very helpful colour map at the back does much to help (though one wishes that more streets could have been named). The authors should also be commended for a book that is emphatically *not* about Basil Spence's Cathedral (though it does appear somewhat as an appendix on pp. 122-25) but instead brining our attention to the overall experience of the city.